

## Joshua Cameron

### “Adam, Samuel, and Nature in *East of Eden*”

If *The Grapes of Wrath* is John Steinbeck's most famous work, then *East of Eden* is his most monumental. It is in this novel that Steinbeck sets forth his most cogent arguments on life and morality; one of the more important being that humanity's moral dilemma is in how nature is dealt with. In his essay "Outside of Paradise" John Ditsky states that "the moral worth of every individual human being can be measured, . . . upon the scale of the right use of Nature's gifts" (15-16). Steinbeck's belief in how nature is connected with morality is best seen in the differences between two of the major characters; whereas Samuel Hamilton is used as a foil for Adam Trask. Adam tries to tame nature and comes to ruin but Samuel understands and respects nature and leads a spiritually fruitful life. One of the main differences between the two is that Samuel is a man of faith likened to the prophets of the Old Testament, while Adam needs data to back up his ideas before he will believe in something.

For his earlier novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck focuses on the Okies who are migrants escaping Oklahoma's dust bowl during the Great Depression. Despite arriving in California penniless, the Okies make the best out of what they have. Even though these families are present in *East of Eden*, Steinbeck focuses on Adam Trask who, by failing to use nature's gifts accordingly, tries to bend nature to his will. Forming a juxtaposition with the penniless families who are struggling to carve out a living in the Salinas Valley, Steinbeck says that "there were others who, . . . got the good land of the valley and cleared the yellow mustard away and planted wheat. Such a man was Adam Trask" (13). Upon his arrival in the Salinas Valley, Adam systematically looks at the land available in an effort to settle only on the best. However, unlike the less-fortunate who toil in an effort to get their less productive land to yield what it may, Adam does not farm his land to its natural potential. Instead, he tries to subvert nature to produce wealth.

Steinbeck creates a dichotomy between his two main characters in that Adam Trask does not have the kind of relationship with the land that connects him to the natural world and Samuel Hamilton does. Samuel can relate to nature because he understands and respects the natural order. Samuel has "That intensive knowledge, . . . [which] is fundamental to living with the land as opposed to merely using or abusing the land" (Timmerman 320). From the moment he acquires land in the Salinas Valley Adam is shown to not have a right, or spiritual, relationship with nature; because of this he is out of tune with the land. This is evident when Adam hires Samuel to force water out of his land. When he arrives on Adam's farm, it is revealed through their conversation that Adam does not understand natural systems. Adam observes that his property is "blowing away bit by bit . . ." (164). In his correction of Adam, Samuel displays an understanding of the land, "No, it's just moving over a little. You lose some to the James ranch but you get some from the Southeys" (164). Steinbeck uses this situation to make a distinction between the two men: Samuel intimately knows the land but Adam misuses what he has by focusing on how he can subjugate his land and not on what nature can provide him with.

In the beginning, Adam intends to let nature provide for him, despite not having a spiritual connection to the land. He wants to plant beans, a crop that "people can stay alive on . . ." (434), and alfalfa, a useful but inexpensive crop. When Adam tells Samuel his plans, Samuel informs him that alfalfa never made anyone rich. Adam says to his friend that he was not thinking of making money; he wants to run a utilitarian farm, not wasting any of what his land

provides him. "That's what I want to do," says Adam, "Sell butter and cheese and feed the milk to the pigs" (165).

As time goes by, Adam becomes more concerned with using his land for material wealth, which makes him blind to the spiritual wealth that nature offers. The great naturalist John Muir once said that "wealth usually creates desire for more. . . dimming or shutting out almost everything worth seeing" (22-23), which can be directly applied to Adam, who wants to buy an ice factory to allow him to ship to the East the vegetables he grows during the winter, in spite of not having planted the beans that he wanted to in the earlier chapters. When Adam informs Lee, a friend and student of Samuel Hamilton, that he is going to buy the ice plant, Lee remarks, "You might plant some beans too . . ." (434). Being such a simple, life-sustaining crop, the beans are representational of the goodness that nature can provide, something Adam is sorely lacking in. Lee makes this recommendation because he knows of Adam's need to plant some beans in his life.

Unlike Samuel who makes the best of what he has by growing a garden on a ridiculously small plot of land, Adam lets his land waste away because he is concerned more with material wealth than sustenance. In his quest for wealth, Adam becomes the image of his forsaken land: fallow and wasting away. Samuel, who does identify with the land, reveals this predicament to Adam because "It is the identity of man and soil that gives Sam the authority to challenge Adam as a 'fallow man' on 'fallow land' living a fallow life" (Ditsky 28). Since he does not grasp for wealth, Samuel, like Lee, is not blind to "almost everything worth seeing" (Muir 22-23) and he can perceive Adam's need for a spiritual connection to nature.

Samuel has the spiritual connection with nature that allows him to "pick a spear of grass and set it between his teeth . . ." (286), enabling him to taste the land. Adam, however, cannot taste nature's goodness because he does not identify with the land and fails to get his land to produce because his intentions are in the wrong place. Instead of planting a crop that "people can stay alive on . . ." (434), such as beans, Adam tries to ship his refrigerated vegetables across the country for a profit; he is not interested in providing sustenance but pleasure. Adam is warned that people will not buy his vegetables because back East they do not need food that will bring them pleasure but food that will help them survive the winter. Will tries to explain this to Adam when he says, "People in the East aren't used to vegetables in the winter" (433).

In as much as Adam does not have any spiritual connection with the land, he attempts to domesticate nature. Just as Adam showed he does not understand natural systems when he hired Samuel to extricate water from his land, he reveals his ignorance again by experimenting with refrigeration. Adam belongs to the group of people who "concoct their sundry schemes for ways to make themselves wealthy . . ." (Ditsky 25) and even his son Cal "feels he must change Nature . . ." (Ditsky 25). By trying to change the natural order of nature Adam once again fails to bring about the goodness of the land and reaps the rotten fruit a controlled nature produces. For his attempt at refrigeration, nature provides him with "six carloads of horrible slop with a sizable charge just to get rid of it" (435).

In Samuel Hamilton there are no ideas about how to improve his land nor are there any get-rich-quick schemes; to him nature is almost sacrosanct. This is because Steinbeck molds Samuel as the one character in the novel "who stands, . . . for everything potentially sacramental . . ." (DeMott 215). When Adam tries to get Samuel to help him raise a garden of non-utilitarian, expensive flower seeds, telling him "There's money in that" (296), Samuel gently turns the offer down. While he is content on his land, Adam is not, despite the fact that Samuel is on some of the worst land in the Salinas Valley and Adam is on some of the best. Steinbeck refers to Adam's

land as "the richness of the bottom land and the greenness around the Salinas River" (10). Juxtaposed against this description is Samuel on "acres [that] were harsh and dry. . . . the crust of the topsoil was so thin that the flinty bones stuck through. Even the sagebrush struggled to exist . . ." (9). And yet, Samuel loves his land.

This love is seen in that Samuel does not attempt to dominate nature because he has developed an understanding of "'natural selection,' which [Steinbeck] said is ultimately kind and benevolent" (Gaither 45). This "kindness and benevolence" is embodied in Samuel as he allows the processes of natural selection to play themselves out on his property by not forcing his dry and arid land to bring forth what it cannot naturally provide. Speaking about the love he has for his land, Samuel says, "I love that dust heap. . . . I love it the way a bitch loves her runty pup. I love every flint, the plow-breaking outcroppings, the thin and barren topsoil, the waterless heart of her. Somewhere in my dust heap there's a richness" (295). Unlike Adam, Samuel loves nature for what it is, not for what, with human interference, it can produce for him.

As the novel progresses, Samuel is portrayed as a prophet of nature. The introduction to Marilyn Chandler McEntyre's essay states that "*Steinbeck's prophets, men of broad understanding and acceptance, draw their vision from the natural world*" (113). Samuel reads the signs when he "took up a handful of the harsh gravelly earth in his palm and spread it with his forefinger, flint and sandstone and bits of shining mica and a frail rootlet and a veined stone" (286). Steinbeck uses this scene to unify the image of Samuel as a prophet with the beginning of the novel when he causes water to flow out of Adam's land for a thirst-slaked Salinas Valley, just as Moses did the same for the thirsty and wandering Israelites. Samuel does not automatically know where the water is, but says that he can feel where it is in his skin and uses his divining rod to guide him toward this precious commodity. When asked by Adam how the stick works, Samuel replies, "I don't really believe in it save that it works. . . . [it] forced me to do a magic to bring up to the surface the thing I know anyway" (166-67).

Samuel enjoys a reality brought about by experiencing life, which makes him of qualitative thought because this form of experience cannot be assigned a set value. In this sense, Samuel has faith and only requires experiential data. In contrast, Adam belongs to the school of quantitative thought since he needs empirical data before he will believe in something "because men do not trust themselves any more . . ." (12). An example of this is when Samuel is on Adam's farm looking for water. Before he begins the search, Adam briefs him with his measurable, quantitative data. "Now then, . . . thirty-six acres and almost level as a floor. I put an auger down. Topsoil averages three and a half feet, sand on top and loam within plow reach. Think you could get water there?" (165). Samuel's only reply is, "I don't know . . . I'll see" (165). He explains to Adam that he does not know where the water is, he only feels it. When Samuel asks if he understands, Adam replies "I'd have to think about it . . ." (167), insinuating that he lacks faith and cannot experience this form of data.

From their differing thought patterns the two characters become foils for each other. Kyoko Ariki discusses in her essay comments Steinbeck made in his *Journal of a Novel* on this relationship, which "'will be all contrasts and balances' (42)" (Ariki 235). Steinbeck explains this connectedness between his two main characters in the book he wrote just prior to *East of Eden*. In *The Log From the Sea of Cortez* Steinbeck draws a dichotomy in how one experiences nature; this dichotomy is the connection between Adam and Samuel. The example Steinbeck uses is with a species of fish named "the Mexican Sierra" (2). A person can try to experience this fish through "formalin solution . . ." (2) in a lab. Here one can learn about the fish by counting its dorsal spines, arriving at ". . . XVII-15-IX" (2). This is the empirical or quantitative method and

is how Adam experiences the natural world. The approach taken by Samuel is to make direct contact with the fish in the open ocean which enables the observer to feel the power of the fish, allowing that person to learn more about life than by simply counting the spines in the dorsal fin. "But if the Sierra strikes hard on the line so that our hands are burned, if the fish sounds and nearly escapes and finally comes in over the rail, his colors pulsing and his tail beating the air, a whole new relational externality has come into being- an entity which is more than the sum of the fish plus the fisherman" (2). This form of experience allows the observer to become connected with the natural world.

The differences in Adam and Samuel's perceptions of nature can best be summed up by the different qualities they possess. Samuel has the qualities of patience, kindness, trust, hope, perseverance, truth, and love. Conversely, Adam possesses the qualities "that ultimately prove as fatal to the strong as to the weak" (Gaither 45). These are "Greed, destruction, selfishness, pollution, bigotry, violence, and waste. . . . Steinbeck makes a distinction between these and 'natural selection', which he said is ultimately kind and benevolent" (Gaither 45). The reason that Samuel is able to love his dust heap is because he sees the forces of nature that put him there as kind and benevolent. On the other hand, through his quest for material wealth Adam fails to achieve the spiritual connection that Samuel has with the land. Adam knows it is there but cannot understand it because he needs empirical evidence, and no amount of data can lead him to this connectedness.

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